

# Menu Planning

## Overview

Good menu planning involves consideration of the entire food service operation. For sponsors participating in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and School Breakfast Program (SBP), the menu needs to meet federal meal pattern requirements in order to qualify to receive reimbursement for meals served. The meal pattern requirements are set by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and are based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. Menu planning should consider students' preferences and take into account details such as kitchen equipment, serving location, food costs, labor budget, staff skills, product availability, and food safety. Planning menus also includes thinking about how individual foods work together in regards to taste, appearance, and aroma and the possibility of incorporating local foods.

## Terminology

**Cycle menu-** A menu developed for a certain length of time and repeated on a periodic basis. The menu is different for each day during the cycle.

***Dietary Guidelines for Americans*** – Written guidelines intended for ages two years and over, jointly issued and updated every five years since 1980 by the USDA and the Department of Health and Human Services. The *Guidelines* encourage Americans to consume a nutritious diet, focusing on foods and beverages that help achieve and maintain a healthy weight, promote health, and prevent disease.

**Standardized recipe** – A recipe that has been tried, adapted, and retried several times for use by a food service operation and has been found to produce the same good results and yield every time when the exact procedures are followed with the same type of equipment and the same quantity and quality of ingredients.

**Whole grain-rich (WGR)** – Whole grain-rich products must contain at least 50-percent whole-grains, and the remaining grain, if any, must be enriched. To qualify as WGR, the item must: meet portion size requirements for the grains component; have at least 50 percent of the grains in the product as whole grains; have all the grains in the product be whole or enriched; have whole grain as the primary ingredient by weight (non-mixed dishes) or as the primary *grain* ingredient by weight (mixed dishes). For further information, see the Whole Grain Resource link listed under Resources.

## What is Menu Planning?

For purposes of federal meal programs, menu planning is a process to help ensure a healthful diet within the parameters of the NSLP and the SBP meal patterns. Menu planning should provide a variety of foods, low in saturated fat, and moderate in sodium, total fat, and sugar, with no trans fat. The Nutrient Analysis Protocols guidance manual is available in MyIdahoCNP

in Download Forms. Please refer to the Breakfast Meal Pattern and Lunch Meal Pattern sections in the Reference Guide for information as well.

*Suggestions for menu planning success:*

- Set aside a time and place for uninterrupted menu planning
- Have reference materials handy (i.e., meal pattern requirements)
- Plan menus for one week at a time
- Confirm foods are creditable (i.e., grains are whole grain-rich)
- Utilize USDA foods
- Balance higher-cost foods with lower-cost foods over several days or a week
- Think about the equipment and time you have available
- Plan the main dish first; the main entrée may also contain grains and/or vegetables
- Plan side dishes to meet the remainder of the meal pattern requirements
- Serve a variety of foods, making sure that the same foods are not repeated more than once a week
- Include foods that are different shapes - round, square, rectangular, wedge-shaped
- Include foods that are different colors - tan, brown, yellow, orange, red, bright green
- Include foods that are different textures - soft, fluffy, crunchy, crisp, creamy, smooth
- Include foods that have different tastes - sweet, sour, tart, spicy, mild
- Introduce new foods along with familiar foods
- Consider suggestions from students and parents
- Do not have salt shakers or sugar packets available
- Use low fat, low sodium products
- Consider offering a salad bar as this helps plan for vegetable subgroups
- Use cycle menus, advantages include:
  - Efficiency / time savings due to food preparation familiarity
  - Better forecasting for food purchasing due to production record information
  - Ease of altering menu or substituting foods not available with another similarly creditable food
  - Potential to try new foods and recipes
  - Ability to take advantage of food bargains and foods in season
  - Using leftovers wisely
  - Ensuring nutrition standards are met
- Use standardized recipes, advantages include:
  - Ensuring product quality by
    - Consistently providing high quality food items
    - Yielding the same amount of product each time
    - Providing consistent portion sizes
  - Ensuring consistency by
    - Accurately predicting the number of portions from each recipe
    - Eliminating excessive amounts of leftovers and substitutions
  - Controlling costs by

- Specifying exact amounts of ingredients
- Managing purchasing and storage better
- Ensuring good results by
  - Encouraging more confidence in food service workers
  - Assuring managers that the nutrient analysis will be accurate as long as ingredients and preparation methods remain the same
  - Increasing student satisfaction with consistent food quality
- Use The Food Buying Guide:
  - If you do not have a Child Nutrition Label (CN Label) or product formulation statement (PFS)
  - To determine the type of food used (e.g., fresh, frozen, canned, whole, diced, etc.)
  - To determine how much of a food to purchase
  - To determine how a recipe contributes to the meal pattern

### *CN Label*

The USDA Child Nutrition (CN) Labeling Program provides food manufacturers the option to include a standardized food crediting statement on their product label, such as the specific portion of a meat/meat alternate, grain, and/or vegetable/fruit component of the meal pattern requirements. For juice drinks and juice drink products, the statement shall identify their contribution toward the vegetable/fruit component of the meal pattern requirements. CN Labels must be authorized by USDA Food Nutrition Service (FNS) prior to use and manufacturers must have quality control procedures and inspection oversight that meet the FNS requirements.

- Keep CN label documentation on file for three (3) years plus the current year
- CN labels that are photographed or photocopied must be visible and legible
- CN labels must be the most current; a new CN label must be filed anytime a product changes and the documentation on file must match the food products being served
- CN labels expire after five years from the approval date

### *Product Formulation Statement*

A product formulation statement has the product name, company letterhead, formulation, signature from an official company representative, and it demonstrates how the product meets the meal pattern. SFAs should have a copy of the food label from the purchased product in addition to the product formulation statement. PFS are only needed when a processed product does not have a valid CN label or watermarked CN label.

- Keep PFS documentation on file for three (3) years plus the current year
- PFS must be the most current; a new PFS must be filed anytime a product changes and the documentation on file must match the food products being served
- Product Formulation Statements expire after five years from the signed date

### *USDA Foods Fact Sheet*

The FNS provides documentation on USDA foods, including nutrition information, product description, and crediting. Please see the USDA Foods section in the Reference Guide.

### *Fruits and Vegetables*

Familiarity may increase acceptance of foods, so it is advantageous that fruit and vegetables must be served daily (with specific vegetable subgroups offered weekly) in the NSLP and fruit/vegetable in the SBP. Salad bars can be especially helpful in meeting vegetable subgroup requirements in the NSLP.

### *Whole Grain-Rich*

School meals offer the goodness of whole grains. Whole grains provide B vitamins, minerals, and fiber to help students feel full longer, stay alert, and concentrate at school. All grains offered as part of school lunch and breakfast must be whole grain-rich.

### *Dietary Specifications*

Upon State agency administrative review for nutrient analysis, menus are analyzed for compliance in meeting nutrient standards/dietary specifications. Please refer to The Nutrient Analysis Protocol guidance manual. As a general rule, if menus meet the meal pattern requirements (documented with meal certification worksheets) and low sodium, low fat products are used, the menus should be compliant with the dietary specifications of saturated fat, trans fat, sodium, and calories averaged over a one week period of time. Please refer to the USDA meal pattern for dietary specifications.

### *Saturated Fat*

The standard specification of less than 10% of total calories as saturated fat applies to the average daily percent of saturated fat found in a week of reimbursable meals. Discretionary sources of calories, such as solid fats, may be added to the menu as long as the menu stays within the specifications for calories, saturated fat, and sodium.

### *Trans Fat*

There are two sources of *trans* fat, also known as *trans* fatty acids:

- *Trans* fat formed naturally - produced by some grazing animals, so small quantities of *trans* fat can be found in animal products like milk, milk products, and meat.
- *Trans* fat formed during food processing - created when vegetable oil is made more solid (a process called hydrogenation). Partially hydrogenated oils are used by food manufacturers to improve the texture, shelf life, and flavor stability of foods. About half of the *trans* fat Americans consume is from processed foods and partially hydrogenated oils are the main source of this type of *trans* fat.

Per USDA guidance, *trans* fat should be eliminated (i.e., labels must state 0 gm *trans* fat) since it raises blood cholesterol, which increases the risk for developing heart disease.

### *Low Sodium*

Sodium, also known as salt, is often added to foods during processing, cooking, or at the table. While the body needs some sodium, almost everyone eats more than the body needs. Schools participating in the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs play an important

part in efforts to reduce the amount of salt consumed by offering lower sodium versions of foods and by flavoring foods with sodium-free spices and herbs.

### *Calories*

Please refer to the meal pattern for breakfast and for lunch, noting the age-grade group differencing regarding calorie ranges. Remember that dietary specifications, including calories, are averaged over a one week period of time.

### *Buy American*

The William F. Goodling Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act of 1998 added a new provision requiring SFAs to purchase domestically grown and processed foods, to the maximum extent practical. Purchases made in accordance with the Buy American provision must still follow the applicable procurement rules calling for free and open competition. There are two situations which may warrant a waiver to permit purchases of foreign food products:

- The product is not produced or manufactured in the U.S. in sufficient and reasonable available quantities of a satisfactory quality.
- Competitive bids reveal the costs of a U.S. product is significantly higher than the foreign product.
- Documentation to support purchasing decisions is required.

### *Local Foods*

The USDA defines a locally grown food as one that has traveled no more than 400 miles to its final destination for sale and consumption. There are several benefits to buying locally: better food, a better local economy, and a better local environment. Idaho Preferred is a local website that contains helpful information such as locating local farmers markets as well as food stores who offer locally grown foods. There are recipes available along with a variety of other resources.

### *Salad Bars*

USDA encourages the use of salad bars in the school meal programs. Salad bars have the potential to improve nutrition and encourage the consumption of fruits, vegetables, and legumes. In addition to the nutritional benefits, salad bars may lower plate waste in school feeding programs. While there are many benefits of salad bars, USDA is cognizant that salad bars are not always a viable option in some school food service operations. USDA encourages SFAs to incorporate salad bars into their school food service operations when possible, and to explore other creative options when salad bars are not an option.

### *Substitutions*

Occasionally it may be necessary to make a substitution to a planned menu for reasons such as food not delivered, the incorrect product delivered, or food unavailability. If a food needs to be substituted, it must meet the same nutritional meal component requirement as the food it is substituting.

*Production Records* (see the Production Records section in the Reference Guide)

Keeping accurate and organized production records are a critical component to being a successful menu planner. Production records ensure the staff prepares the correct menu items in the correct portion sizes to fit the required meal pattern. Production records also provide a record that reimbursable meals were served, which is very important for proof of meal pattern compliance for State agency Administrative Reviews. A lack of production records or incomplete production records could result in the school not receiving reimbursement for the meals, if there is not proof that reimbursable meals were served. Please see the Reference Manual section entitled Production Records for details.

### **Why is Menu Planning important?**

Planning menus utilizing the SBP and the NSLP requirements aims to provide the best overall meals possible along with the nutrients required to support learning and growth while sustaining health and developing good eating habits. Healthy eating patterns formed during childhood are attributed to healthier eating patterns in later years. By choosing the reimbursable meal, students are assured a meal that meets national nutrition standards and complies with the recommendations of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

### **Resources**

Additional resources may be available for this topic. Please check the Idaho School Nutrition Reference Guide website for copies of manuals, user guides, and helpful links to relevant subject matter.